STUART MERRILL

WHEN WE WERE SYMBOLISTS

Translated from the French

by

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in collaboration with

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FIRST ENGLISH TRANSLATION

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by Stuart Merrill

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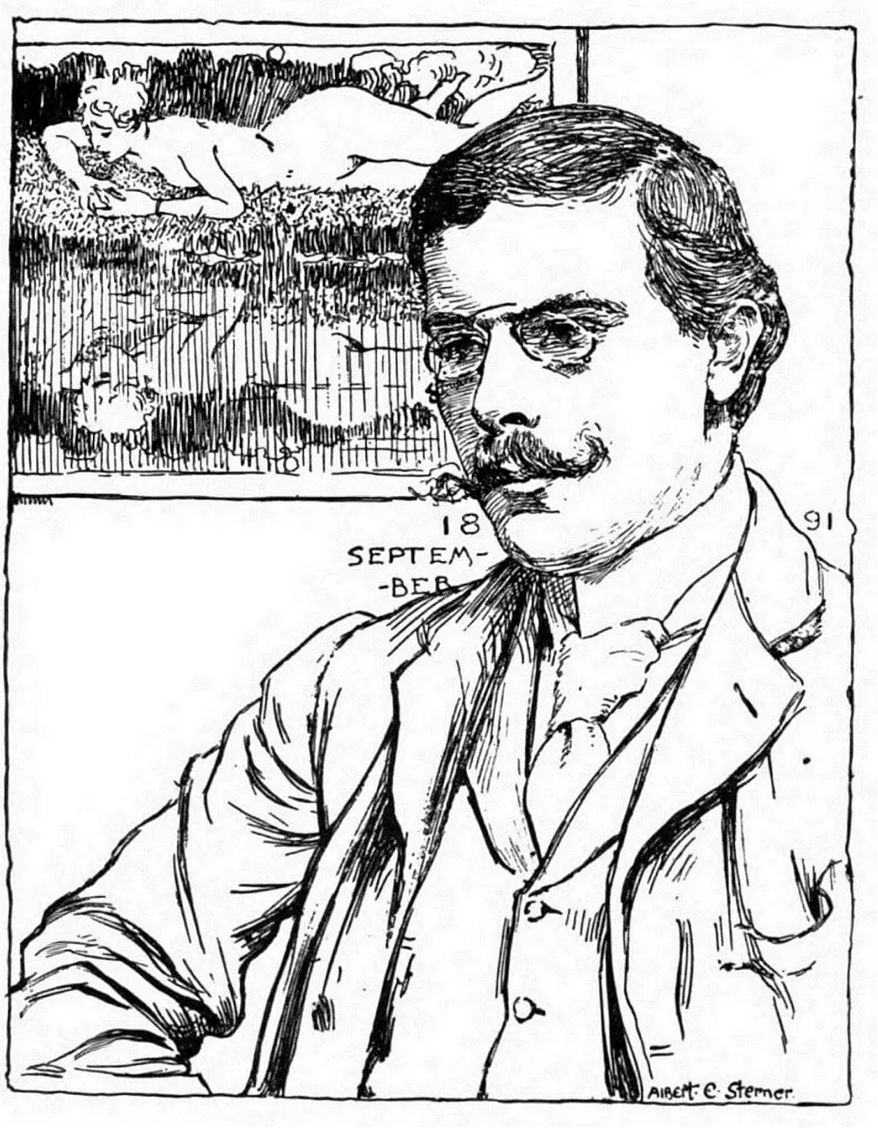

Stuart Merrill

by Albert E. Sterner, 1891

When We Were Symbolists

Being away from France from 1885 to 1889, I took part only from a great distance in the beginnings of Symbolism, although I contributed, more or less, to most of the reviews that appeared between those two dates: the *Basoche*, the *Scapin*, the *Décadent*, the *Décadence*, the *Écrits pour l'art*, the *Wallonie*, the *Revue Wagnérienne*, and others. I believe the only contents pages that do not carry my name are those of *Lutèce* and of the first *Pléiade*.

Let me speak of a few of these reviews, whose stained and dusty files I turn over with emotion. We put into them so much hope, courage and faith, and so much hardly scraped-together money! The poets of that time often went without their dinner to keep alive for a little

while some small sheet that nobody read. The beginners of today can have no idea of the indifference of the public of 1885 towards poetry. No review would publish verse, and the Parnassians, weary of the struggle, were giving themselves up to journalism. Bourget, to be sure, had a *succès d'estime*, and Rollinat even a success of advertisement. But Leconte de Lisle, one may boldly say, for all the fine devotion of the Parnassians, remained unknown to the general public until he entered the Académie. As for Verlaine, Mallarmé, Dierx and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, ours was the pride and the glory of spreading their names everywhere. Without us they would be obscure still. Thanks to our poor little reviews, whose very titles are only beginning to be known fifteen years after they disappeared, they have become illustrious, and are recognised as the true initiators of a new poetry.

The first of these reviews was *Lutèce*. I shall come back to it later; besides, it has often been talked about. But hardly anyone knows the *Basoche*, which was founded in November 1884, at Brussels, by Henry de Tombeur, since dead. The whole Condorcet group wrote for it, notably Mikhaël, Quillard, Ghil, Fontainas, Darzens

and myself. Among its other contributors were MM. Jean Ajalbert, Célestin Demblon, Georges d'Esparbès, Émile Goudeau, Stanislas de Guaita, Théo Hannon, J.-K. Huysmans, Camille Lemonnier, Jean Lorrain, Catulle Mendès, Émile Michelet, Edmond Picard, and lastly Jean Rameau, whom the *Figaro*'s literary competition had just revealed to innocent Belgium.

I quote some passages from an article by M. Jean Ajalbert on *Lutèce*, not only for their anecdotal interest, but to give some idea of the liveliness of literary polemics in the year of grace 1885:

> Every summer some columnist ventures to discover that literature does not consist only of those who have arrived, and lets fall from his pen the name of some unknown. In the last of the hot weather the news leaked out that there existed a school of "decadents". And everyone cried out: "What are decadents? Where do they sell them?" It even seems that one merry evening the Duc de Morny asked at Bignon's to be served a decadent with watercress. The crowd was delirious; the reporters, in their pilgrimages through the brasseries of Montmartre and the Latin Quarter, discovered two or three phlegmatic poets who let themselves be saddled with the name of decadents. Decadents were served up with every kind of sauce, and the

papers set about baiting *Lutèce*, the organ of the young literature.

"Now neither M. Bourde nor M. Champsaur was in a position to speak of the young men with any knowledge. The 'new literature' seems as little familiar to M. Bourde as to M. Edmond Lepelletier, who accuse us of writing lines that do not scan! As for M. Félicien Champsaur, he is more particularly incompetent. In verse or in prose, he has scarcely done anything but other people's verse and prose; he has not forgotten that our friend R. Darzens, in an article in the *Jeune France* entitled 'A Literary Lackey', called him a picker-up of cigar-ends; nevertheless this hired insulter of the *Figaro* supplement, emerging from the mire in which he is sunk, emptied his weekly potful of abuse over the 'Décadenticulets'. Gathering up the most inept tittle-tattle about their private lives, he came forward to reproach one with his deformity, another with his friendships, others with their loves.

"... These gentlemen of the Right Bank must have been somewhat at a loss to build up the two columns and a few lines that make up 'the article'. They knew nothing of a number of little books of verse that had come out here and there, and they certainly did not frequent the premises of Trézenik and Rall. For *Lutèce* is not loved, and that is easy to understand. *Lutèce* is a periodical kick in the backside to ignorant columnists and imbecile reporters. No master

is respected there; and when Zola and Cladel publish *L'Œuvre* and *La Mi-Diable* to the admiring approval of the press, *Lutèce* sounds the alarm: 'Zola is dying, Cladel is dead!'

"... *Lutèce* publishes in turn the verses of Jean Rameau, G. d'Esparbès, Edmond Haraucourt, Fernand Icres, Henri Beauclair (Adoré Floupette), Émile Goudeau, Georges Lorin, Vignier, L. Tailhade, Jean Moréas, Robert Caze, and lastly Paul Verlaine, who is perhaps the most curious poet of our time.

"... The contributors go to gather the sheet as it comes off the presses on Friday evening. At the printing-works one meets Verlaine, Moréas, Caze, de Régnier, Grenet-Dancourt, G. Lorin, J. Vidal, P. Adam, R. Darzens, E. Mikhaël, Raynaud, Griffin, Norès, Colh, and Henri Maugis, the dramatic critic; and the hours pass in speaking ill of the absent, everyone standing, nobody noticing that there are only two chairs in the editorial office. Printing-works, management, editorial office: it is all one. Léo Trézenik and Georges Rall are printers, over there by the Halle-aux-Vins; and it was in their compositors' blouses that they one day received Jean Lorrain, glossy, rotten with smartness, and obstinately asking for the editor. Thanks to this printing-works they have secured a sovereign independence: the editors of *Lutèce* are masters in their own

> house; they write and print as it pleases them; often excessive, often unjust, but out of love for art."

I mention only for the record Édouard Dujardin's *Revue Wagnérienne*, in which there appeared, on 8 January 1886, a series of sonnets written to the glory of Wagner by Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, René Ghil, Stuart Merrill, Charles Morice, Charles Vignier, Téodor de Wyzewa and Édouard Dujardin. These sonnets caused a scandal in the press and finished compromising us with the public, which preferred to read *Charlot s'amuse*.

The first *Pléiade*, which ran to only six numbers, dates from March 1886. It was one of the most remarkable of the vanished reviews. It published most of Mikhaël's prose poems, René Ghil's famous *Traité du verbe*, Quillard's *La Fille aux mains coupées*, Maeterlinck's *Le Massacre des innocents* (which has never been reprinted), verses by Van Lerberghe, and lastly, by Grégoire Le Roy, a poet who has fallen silent for I know not what reasons, a series of poems that announced an admirable new master. I need no other proof than this sonnet:

LES BREBIS MORNES

N'est-ce pas que c'est triste et funèbre, la vie?
Et que nous sommes fous d'empoisonner nos jours
D'illusion de gloire et de rêves d'amour?
Et de loucher toujours des yeux avec envie?

Voyez! ces mains d'épouse, et de mère et de sœur
Qui guériraient nos cœurs avec de la douceur,
Eh! bien, comme un enfant ridicule et qui boude,
Durs, nous les écartons d'un geste avec le coude.

Cette simple maison d'où nous sommes partis
Nous semble trop étroite à nos âmes trop fières,
Nous tendons notre lèvre aux seins froids des
chimères…

Vraiment mais on dirait d'un troupeau de brebis
Qui, dans un pré bien vert levant des cous moroses,
Bêleraient sottement après un champ de roses.

[THE DOLEFUL SHEEP]

[Is life not sad and funeral in its way?
And are we not insane to poison hours
With dreams of love and glory's phantom powers,
Forever squinting sideways in dismay?

Behold these hands of sister, mother, wife,
That might with tenderness heal every strife;
Yet like a silly child who sulks and pouts,
We thrust them off with elbows, cold as louts.

That simple house from which we made our start
Now seems too narrow for our swollen pride;
We press our lips to cold chimeras' side…

We're truly just a flock that stands apart
In verdant fields, with necks raised up morose,
And bleats in folly for a field of rose.]

On 7 January 1887 there appeared, under the direction of my old and dear friend René Ghil, the *Écrits pour l'art*, which stopped at the sixth number, to begin again later. This first series was adorned with portraits of Stéphane Mallarmé, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, René Ghil, Henri de Régnier, Francis Vielé-Griffin and Stuart Merrill, and published verses by Émile Verhaeren, George Khnopff and Albert Saint-Paul, and prose by Charles-Eudes Bonin and Mario Varvara.

It is right to pay homage here to the memory of Gaston Dubedat, who founded the *Écrits pour l'art* and kept them going in a second series until his death. This second series no longer counts the names of Francis

Vielé-Griffin and Henri de Régnier, who had no wish to be saddled with the title of "evolutive-instrumentists", but it adds those of Albert Lantoine, the haughty and sumptuous poet; Pierre Dévoluy, now *capoulié* of the Félibrige; Achille Delaroche, who wrote, in the number of *La Plume* devoted to Jean Moréas, the most judicious article on Symbolism that I know; Albert Saint-Paul, the precious conjurer-up of *Scènes de bal*; Georges Docquois, grandson of Glatigny and of Banville; Marcel Batilliat, who had not yet given up verse for the novel; and Zévaès, the fierce Guesdist, who was then called Alexandre Bourson.

Apropos of Dubedat, René Ghil once told me an anecdote which he assured me was true. Dubedat was living at Bordeaux at the time. One fine day he received a summons from the commissary of police of his district, whom he found turning over a file of the *Écrits pour l'art*.

"Monsieur," the commissary asked him point-blank, "what is the object of your review? What is the meaning of these logogriphs set out in the form of verse:

Mais les hasards haïs, qui gardent le moment
Traînaient sur d'éveillés vestiges de ramages
Tout le nuage lourd au songe véhément,
Variant d'un vœu vain le somme sans hommages.[1]

[But the hated hazards, which keep the moment,
Were dragging over wakened vestiges of warbling
All the heavy cloud of the vehement dream,
Varying with a vain vow the slumber without homage.]

"And these riddles in prose: give me the key to them. 'A hundred posters, assimilating the uncomprehended gold of the days, a betrayal of the letter, have fled, as to all the confines of the town, my eyes, level with the horizon, by a departure on the rail…'[2]

"Lastly, I want information about all these persons with outlandish names who write for your review. Nobody really has the right to be called Khnopff, Verhaeren, Zévaès or Stuart Merrill. As for Mallarmé, that is obviously a pseudonym."

Dubedat, taken aback, did not know what to answer to so strange an interrogation, and asked what was wanted

1. René Ghil.
2. Stéphane Mallarmé.

of him. By a thousand artful circumlocutions the commissary at last made himself understood. The *Écrits pour l'art* had been taken for the organ of an international ring of spies, in which the members corresponded with one another in a cipher. Dubedat had some trouble in clearing himself, and in proving that in his review the most that was betrayed was the fine clarity of the French language.

The *Écrits* having ceased to appear for some months, their contributors were taken in by the *Wallonie*, a review directed at Liège by M. Albert Mockel. I really believe that every interesting poet of the time figures in the contents of the *Wallonie*. I shall not try to list them. Young and old rubbed shoulders there in good fellowship, and M. Albert Mockel directed them with tact and authority. It was he who received French men of letters at Liège, and offered them that Belgian hospitality which is sometimes formidable, and of which Stéphane Mallarmé was a victim. Mallarmé had been invited to give lectures on Villiers de l'Isle-Adam in various Belgian towns. He set great store by a certain little stage effect, which consisted in speaking the first sentences of the lecture standing, and then sit-

ting down. The business is even indicated in the printed lecture. “Now,” Stéphane Mallarmé told me, “as I had always dined with Belgian friends before the lecture, I was never once able to deliver my opening sentences on my feet.”

M. Gustave Kahn having spoken elsewhere of the first *Vogue* and of the *Revue Indépendante*, M. Adolphe Retté of the *Cravache* and of the second *Vogue*, and M. Ernest Raynaud of the *Décadent*, I pass on to other subjects.

Back in Paris in 1889, I quickly made the acquaintance of my brethren in Symbolism, with whom I had until then had only an exchange of letters. One fine day Adolphe Retté came to see me and said: “Gustave Kahn is at home this evening. It’s a chance for you to meet him. Come along with me.” So I set off with Retté, and towards nine o’clock we were knocking at the door of the poet of *Les Palais nomades*. We were shown into a room sparingly furnished with three or four chairs and an oak table covered with daggers. In the middle of the table, jovial and pot-bellied, squatted a bottle of rum. Long experience has since taught me that a literary evening consists essentially of a flask of spirits with poets round it.

What puzzled me were the gashes and notches with which the table was wounded. Who could have damaged in this way so harmless and useful a piece of furniture? I did not yet know poets! At the first name of a man of letters thrown into the conversation, Kahn seized a dagger and drove it into the table, declaring in a tone that was decidedly malevolent: “That fellow wants his paunch ripping open!” I ventured to praise one of our elders: “That one wants his guts reeling out!” And, quivering in a flash, a fresh dagger tore the oak of the table. Terrified, I held my tongue. But some rash spirit, or some wag, threw in a third name: “Him? He wants his belly slitting!” And the deed always went with the word, to the great hurt of the table.

I confess that I admired this good, healthy violence. Besides, M. Gustave Kahn took my fancy from the very first. He was, without any swagger, an Israelite proud of his race. In our discussions he would call us “young Aryans”. It must be said that at that time Arthur Meyer had no influence, and Gaston Pollonais did not yet exist. So I do not dream of making it any great merit in Gustave Kahn that he remained faithful to his own. I simply praise

him for having listened within himself to the voice of the kings and prophets of Israel, of the weeping women of Babylon, and of the great Hebrew poets of Spain.

M. Adolphe Retté, in his book, speaks of a famous restaurant of the Latin Quarter, the Côte d'Or, which stood at the corner of the rue de Vaugirard and the rue de Médicis. Alas! this restaurant has been closed for several months, like the Café François Premier, where we used to take our apéritif with Verlaine. It had been made illustrious, before our time, by the presence of Séverine and Jules Vallès. I dined there every evening with Moréas, Morice, Gauguin, Dubus, Rambosson, Delaroche, Clément Bellenger, Julien Leclercq, du Plessys, and that astonishing Émile Meyerson, who knows every language on earth and those of a few other planets, and to whom Moréas dedicated, in his *Pèlerin passionné*, the "Épître à Æmilius".

It was at the Côte d'Or that I came to know Jean Moréas, and learned to admire and love him. Moréas is one of those shy men, very much awake to the world, who wear a brutal mask in public, as much to keep bores at a distance as to hide their inner sensibility. For a long time

Jean Moréas was misunderstood. M. Jules Huret himself, so shrewd and so malicious, could not resist the temptation of making a light caricature of him in his famous *Enquête*. Yet M. Moréas was always simply and nobly sincere, even when, underlining his words with an upward twist of his moustache, he would announce in the cafés: "I and Ronsard..." The public has long since done justice to the author of the *Stances* and of *Iphigénie*. I am glad today to recall a sentence that M. Moréas, in one of his rare moments of expansiveness, spoke in my presence a few years ago. I find it incomparably beautiful in its simplicity: "I have never done anything unworthy of a poet."

Beside Jean Moréas, Charles Morice had a great influence upon us. Of a haughty and subtle intelligence, of a grave and abundant eloquence, he always charmed us, and often knew how to convince us. His *Littérature de tout à l'heure*, which people are too ready to forget, certainly turned Symbolism towards new paths. Unhappily, after Moréas had founded his École Romane, Charles Morice was bitten with the wish to become a corporal of letters in his turn. In a manifesto in the *Figaro* he founded the École Française, and enrolled as his pupils a

number of poets, among them Le Cardonnel, Dubus and Samain. The very next day the so-called pupils drew up a most dignified protest, in which they declared that, Symbolism being a movement of emancipation in literature, not one of them consented to submit to the wholly personal aesthetic of M. Charles Morice. If I recall this episode, it is to contrast the resolutely libertarian attitude of the Symbolist poets with that of certain new poets who have revived, under the same name, the same school. Need I add that M. Charles Morice, the proud and patient author of *L'Action humaine*, had no more devoted admirers than the very men who refused to become his pupils?

M. Adolphe Retté devotes a special chapter to the dead and the vanished: Édouard Dubus, Albert Aurier, Emmanuel Signoret, Louis Le Cardonnel. I am sorry that he did not see fit to speak of certain habitués of the Côte d'Or who are dead, alas! Paul Gauguin, Clément Bellenger and Julien Leclercq. I shall say a few words about them.

I shall astonish a good many critics, who have deduced so many theories from his works, by saying that

I never once heard Gauguin talk about painting. He would listen with admirable patience, his lips pursed and his eyelids puckered in a half-ironical smile, to our high-flown discourses on art, its origin and its end; but he took good care not to share his ideas with us, supposing he had any. May I be allowed a personal opinion? I believe that Gauguin gave himself up entirely to his temperament as a brutal colourist and a savage deformer, without the least concern to fit in with any aesthetic whatever. What is reported of his teaching at Pont-Aven seems to me puerile and almost trivial. It must not be concluded that he lacked intelligence. On the contrary, his letters and travel notes bear witness to rare gifts of observation, analysis and reasoning. But there was no common term between his art and that of our painters, even the most revolutionary. Paul Gauguin remains, in the worst and the best sense of the word, a monster. Even Van Gogh, that madman of genius, can be placed in known categories: he has ancestors, and will no doubt have a posterity. He is, in other words, of our race. Gauguin, among us, was truly solitary. So we must not be surprised that he left our civilisation to develop without hindrance among

primitive tribes. He was the man to hunt his prey in the forests or in deep waters, to rough-hew century-old trees with his axe, to build himself a dwelling and decorate it with crude carvings and naive pictures. He felt ill at ease in our society. I need no other proof than a conversation I had with him in a cab one night when we were on our way to Mallarmé's. I asked him why he called himself a Symbolist painter. "I can discern," I confessed to him, "no symbolism whatever in your pictures. Gustave Moreau is a symbolist, and so is Puvis de Chavannes, when he does not confuse symbol with allegory. But you!..." Gauguin struggled, trying to explain to me the esoteric meaning of his line and colour; then, seized by a sudden anger, he shouted at me violently: "Oh, you bore me, all you civilised people, with your mania for quibbling about everything, and for making instinct submit to reason, and the work to an aesthetic. I'm a barbarian, d'you hear me? a barbarian!" And he was splendid like that, half risen in the carriage, his Red Indian profile lit by the street-lamps.

If he talked little of painting, he loved to tell us of his voyage to the West Indies. He went there, as is well

known, “before the mast”, as the English say, that is to say as a common seaman. He was equally delighted to give us demonstrations of boxing and savate. His excessive confidence in his muscular strength and his skill as a fighter proved fatal to him in the end. It is well known that one day in Brittany he picked a quarrel with three sailors who had insulted his Tahitian companion, and that in the course of a chivalrous and unequal fight he had his legs broken by a low kick.

Besides, he was the best company in the world. M. Thiébault-Sisson dishonoured himself by making of Gauguin, in the *Temps*, the vilest of caricatures. I can testify, like all his friends, that Gauguin always led the most upright and dignified of lives. He hated pose and pretension. His only passion was work, and, being very careful of his health, he avoided all excess. But, just as Théophile Gautier shocked the bourgeois of his day by the flame-coloured waistcoat he wore at the first night of *Hernani*, so Paul Gauguin offended M. Thiébault-Sisson’s rather feeble eyesight with his Breton waistcoat with its brilliant yellow embroideries. You may well imagine that

so polychrome a gentleman could only be a humbug, a loafer and a drunkard.

Julien Leclercq was another of M. Thiébault-Sisson's victims. Poor Leclercq! If he was not a great poet, he was a great heart. But he was guilty, in M. Thiébault-Sisson's eyes, of the grave fault of wearing a head of hair that I can only compare to a Nubian camel-driver's. Worse still, he was seen at the Bullier dancing fantastic *chahuts* in the company of a painter as hairy as himself! But do you not know, my well-to-do critics, to what abominable necessities indigent artists are often reduced? And beneath the feigned laughter do you not divine the grief that is ready to burst into tears? Julien Leclercq went down through every circle of the Parisian hell. A dreamer and a sentimentalist, he bound himself to the worst drudgery of petty journalism. He managed to keep, in that life of chance and shifts, all his dignity as a man and all his pride as an artist. His poverty was tempered by a few lulls. He wrote books on palmistry that brought him in a little money; then he found a post with Bing, and went to organise exhibitions of French art at Christiania. In the course of one of his journeys he married the woman who

was at last to let him know happiness. But an inexorable fate seems to pursue certain poets whose ideal has come to too poor terms with life. We know that our poor Édouard Dubus died in hospital at the very moment when an unexpected inheritance might perhaps have allowed him to repair, by a long and costly treatment, the ravages that a fatal passion had wrought in him. Julien Leclercq died in the same way, a few days before realising his dream. M. Thiébault-Sisson imagines, perhaps, that this moon-gazer, this sniffer of the wind, this burner of pavements, as soon as he had known the peace of love and the advantages of fortune, settled down with his feet on the fender in the delights of idleness? Not at all! Our friend, though he knew himself condemned to an early death, busied himself in founding, thanks to the generosity of a few foreigners, a newspaper meant to defend throughout the world the eternal cause of justice and the interests of oppressed peoples. An admirable spectacle: a dying man flinging, with a last gesture, the good seed of thought towards the future! On his deathbed Julien Leclercq was organising the staff of the future paper, drawing up its accounts, soliciting contributions. He died before he

could read the contents of the first number of the *Européen*, leaving to others the sacred task of carrying out his plans.

And this is the man whom M. Thiébault-Sisson presented to the readers of the *Temps* as a sort of mandoline-playing monkey! I find it hard to understand how my friend Mazel could maintain, in a recent article, that our generation has never had cause to complain of the critics. At each death of one of us, there is in the press the same pretentious incomprehension, the same underhand malice. I ask, parodying Baudelaire, whether there is not a law to forbid journalists the cemeteries.

One of the most faithful habitués of the Côte d'Or was Clément Bellenger. Pale, thin, with red hair and beard, looking like a Christ in the Garden of Olives, he would eat apart, as though scared by the noise we made and shocked by the extravagance of our paradoxes. But I can already hear someone asking who Clément Bellenger was. Quite simply one of the greatest wood-engravers of the nineteenth century. He was famous in England and in the United States, where the magazines still keep up the taste for an art that is little by little dying out in France.

Towards the end of his life Bellenger had difficulty in finding work. Etching had replaced wood-engraving in fine editions. In such conditions an artist may be excused for defending his vital interests as best he can, and keeping the monopoly of his art to himself as far as possible. But Clément Bellenger was too generous at heart to stoop to such calculations; in spite of straits that bordered on destitution, he went on training pupils. None of those who knew him can forget him. He was kindness, gentleness and generosity itself. To these charming qualities was added the rare gift of admiration. You should have heard him speak of his master, his friend, his god, Daniel Vierge! This shy man would sometimes give way to sudden outbursts of violence, and, with flaming cheeks, he would hurl himself headlong against our paradoxes, which offended his exquisite sincerity.

Others came more seldom to the Côte d'Or dinners: Albert Trachsel, the architect of the *Fêtes réelles*, of whom I once wrote in this review, and de Niederhausern-Rodo, the author of the Verlaine monument which we are still waiting to see set up in the Luxembourg Gardens. Both Swiss, they shared good and bad fortune like true

comrades. One of them, I forget which, had a garret on the sixth floor of a house in the Latin Quarter, where one could stand upright only by putting one's head out through the skylight. On days of plenty our friends would buy a bottle of Danzig Goldwasser, and, glass in hand, their heads thrust out through the roof, they would drink, grave, religious and fraternal, the liqueur that they held up to shimmer against the sunset, "because there was gold in it".

Nor must we forget, among the habitués, the cab-driver Moore, Victor Hugo's protégé and Édouard Lockroy's assailant, who between two fares would come and snatch a bite on the ground floor of the Côte d'Or, and send up to us by the waiter more or less shapeless poems on which he asked for our opinion.

I cannot leave the Côte d'Or without telling of a dinner that Moréas gave there to Oscar Wilde. Let me say at once that I have no wish to make fun either of Wilde or of Moréas. We were, that evening, the victims of an ironical chance; and besides, my anecdote does nothing but honour to the three Romanist disciples of Moréas.

Oscar Wilde was at that time at the height of his fame. Courteous and delicate as he was, he was accustomed in society to listen to himself talking, and hardly liked anyone to set up as his interlocutor. We were six at dinner: Wilde, Moréas, Raynaud, La Tailhède, du Plessys and myself. The meal went off as well as could be. At dessert Oscar Wilde bent his tall figure towards Moréas and asked him to recite some verses. "I never recite anything," answered Moréas, "but, if you will allow, our friend Raynaud will give us something." Raynaud rose, and, his formidable fists planted on the table, announced: "Sonnet to Jean Moréas!" He collected our applause, and then Wilde pressed Moréas again. "No, but our friend La Tailhède..." In his turn La Tailhède stood up, and, his monocle screwed into his eye, gave out in a clear voice: "Ode to Jean Moréas!" Wilde was visibly irritated by the cult that the École Romane paid to its chief; nevertheless, out of courtesy, he kept up his entreaties. "Du Plessys, give us your latest verses," commanded the Master. Up shot du Plessys at a bound, and trumpeted in a ringing voice: "The Tomb of Jean Moréas!" Oscar Wilde, choking, beaten, bewildered, he who in the drawing-rooms of Lon-

don made silence all round him, asked for his hat and greatcoat, and fled into the night. It was certainly the first time that, round a dinner-table, people had neglected to keep all the incense for him.

Jacques Daurelle and I were the first in Paris to write about Oscar Wilde. I think it useless to repeat what I have already written about him. I could add nothing to the admirable articles that MM. André Gide and Ernest La Jeunesse devoted to him. I dare not even publish a poor little note in which Oscar Wilde, who in the days of his fortune had done kindnesses to so many ingrates, asked me for a tiny sum, "so as," he said, "to see out my week". There are disasters so tragic that one can respect them only by silence.

I confirm in passing what Retté tells of the composition of *Salomé*. One day Oscar Wilde handed me his drama, which he had written very fast, at a single sitting, in French, and asked me to correct its obvious mistakes. It was no easy matter to make Wilde accept all my corrections. He wrote French as he spoke it, that is to say with a fancifulness which, delightful as it was in conversation, would have made a deplorable impression in the theatre.

A friend told me recently that in his presence Oscar Wilde ended the story of a king's adventures (for Wilde's heroes were always kings) with this sentence: "*Et puis, alors, le roi il est mouru.*" [And then, well, the king he is deaded.]

So I corrected *Salomé* as best I could. I remember that most of the characters' speeches began with the expletive *enfin!* How many *enfins* I struck out! But I soon perceived that good Wilde had only a relative confidence in my taste, and I recommended him to the care of Retté. Retté carried on my work of correcting and pruning. But Wilde ended by distrusting Retté as much as me, and it was Pierre Louÿs who gave the text of *Salomé* its final polish.

How many dead there are already in these recollections! The other day, turning over the very rare file of the first *Scapin*, I came upon these few lines by Dubus, which have never been published elsewhere, and which mysteriously, I do not know why, lull my melancholy:

> *Nos jours de joie ont de tristes lendemains*
> *Que mieux vaut ignorer à jamais: si tu l'oses,*
> *Dans notre chambre, un soir, les fenêtres bien closes,*
> *Nous épandrons des tubéreuses, des jasmins,*
> *Des lys, des lilas et des grappes de glycine:*
> *Dans l'ombre leur senteur énervante assassine.*

[Our days of joy have sad morrows
Which it is better never to know: if you dare,
In our room one evening, the windows close shut,
We will strew tuberoses and jasmine,
Lilies, lilacs and clusters of wisteria:
In the dark their enervating scent kills.]

I copy from the same *Scapin* (10 January 1886) a poem by Louis Le Cardonnel which was left out of the number of *La Plume* in which a pious hand gathered his scattered verses into an anthology:

LE RÊVE DE LA REINE

La Reine aux cheveux d'ambre, à la bouche sanglante,
tient, de sa dextre longue, ouvert le vitrail d'or,
pensant que l'heure coule ainsi qu'une eau trop lente.
En ses yeux le reflet d'une tristesse dort,
et sur sa robe où sont des fleurs bizarres d'or,
elle laisse dormir son autre main si froide
que dans un sombre jour de chapelle qui dort
de moins rigides mains portent la palme roide!
Soudain, quelle moiteur à sa peau fine et froide!
À son front lisse perle une soudaine langueur,
et son corsage en dur brocart semble moins roide;
est-ce toi, si longtemps immobile, son cœur
qui pourras la venir chasser, cette langueur,
et faire étinceler enfin la somnolence
de ses yeux, si longtemps glacés comme son cœur,
qui la feras tomber, l'armure du silence!
Ô crépuscule, dans ta grande somnolence,
un bois à l'horizon s'étage noir et bleu;
haut, le croissant émerge et s'argente en silence.
L'Hippogriffe attendait dans le couchant de feu;
et la Reine, égarant son regard noir et bleu,
Maudit l'heure qui coule ainsi qu'une eau trop lente,
et sous le dur brocart sentant sa gorge en feu,
mord son exsangue main de sa bouche sanglante!

[THE QUEEN'S DREAM]

[The Queen with amber hair and blood-red mouth
Holds open with her long right hand the golden window,
Thinking that the hour flows like a water too slow.
In her eyes the reflection of a sadness sleeps;
And upon her gown, where there are strange flowers of
gold,
She lets her other hand lie sleeping, so cold
That in the gloomy light of a sleeping chapel
Less rigid hands hold up the stiff palm!
Suddenly, what moistness on her fine cold skin!
On her smooth brow a sudden languor pearls,
And her bodice of stiff brocade seems less stiff:
Is it you, so long motionless, her heart,
Who will come and drive away this languor,
And make the drowsiness at last to sparkle
In her eyes, so long frozen like her heart,
You who will make it fall, the armour of silence?
O twilight, in your great drowsiness
A wood on the horizon rises in tiers, black and blue;
High up, the crescent emerges and silvers in silence.
The Hippogriff was waiting in the fiery sunset;
And the Queen, letting her black-and-blue gaze wander,
Curses the hour that flows like a water too slow,
And, feeling beneath the stiff brocade her throat on fire,
Bites her bloodless hand with her blood-red mouth!]

One already discerns, in these distant verses, the Catholic and legendary scenery that always drew Louis Le Cardonnel. But one would be wrong to see in this admirable poet a mere dilettante of religion. I knew him always, even in the thick of the storm, grave, thoughtful and apostolic. He would address long exhortations to me, to which I listened with half an ear. If he was misunderstood by some, it was because he was incapable of the slightest hypocrisy. He showed himself as he was, without hiding his temptations, his faults or the pangs of his repentance. I have seldom come near a nobler or purer soul. I think of him with emotion, and I hope, deliberate unbeliever though I am, and hostile to all religion, that he has found in his faith peace of heart and mind. I am infinitely happy to hear that he will shortly publish a volume of verse. What does it matter that it should be Catholic in inspiration? Who best understood Verlaine's mystical books, the Catholics or the unbelievers? The answer is not in doubt. Louis Le Cardonnel is, with a few others, such as the critic Alphonse Germain and the poet Adrien Mithouard, the honour of the Church. Why must it be the adversaries of their dogma who admire, esteem and love

them best? Perhaps, above the vain clamour of our quarrels, there is, unheard by most men, a mysterious language, without signs or words, that only poets understand?

On leaving the Côte d'Or on Saturday evenings, we would go on to the soirées of *La Plume*. Of those famous soirées I have no pretension to speak after Léon Maillard, Ernest Raynaud and Adolphe Retté, who helped to organise them. Others again have recalled these gatherings in articles or books. Some have seen in them friendly meetings of good comrades who came to recite verses, listen to songs, tipple and gossip; others, witches' sabbaths, where blood was drunk out of the skulls of little children to the mumbling of abracadabras. M. Maurice Le Blond has given us this latter impression:

> At the soirées of *La Plume*, every Saturday, in a cellar on the "Boul' Mich'", there crowded a picturesque rabble of mystic bards, painters of the soul, song-writers and humbugs of ridiculous bearing... These young men seemed to take a vainglorious pleasure in exiling themselves from the world. They cultivated a peculiar jargon; they affected cynical and mysterious manners.

To reduce this legend, which is tending to spread, to nothing, I need only pick out from the attendance list of a single soirée of *La Plume* (19 December 1890) the following names: Paul Verlaine, Jean Moréas, Julien Leclercq, Louis Dumur, P.-N. Roinard, Louis Le Cardonnel, Léon Bloy, Raymond de la Tailhède, Léon Maillard, Émile Goudeau, Ludovic Naudeau, Grenet-Dancourt, Louis le Dauphin, Maurice du Plessys, John Grand-Carteret, Gabriel de Lautrec, Charles Buet, Eugène Lemercier, Yann Nibor, Pierre Trimouillat, Léon Durocher, Jules Tellier, Pierre Mille, Édouard Dubus, Lugné-Poe, Franck Vincent, André Veidaux, Georges Bonnamour, Gabriel Fabre, Charles Morice, Jean Rameau, Adolphe Retté, F.-A. Cazals, Paterne Berrichon, Niederhausern-Rodo, Lucien Hubert, J.-L. Croze, Maurevert, Yvanhoé Rambosson, Alexandre Boutique, Charles Maurras, and so on: that is to say, poets, novelists, critics, dramatists, journalists, song-writers, musicians, painters, sculptors, architects, theatre directors, and even future deputies and municipal councillors! Opinions were as motley as professions: there were there, mingled in the same cloud of smoke, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, royalists, Bonapartists, rad-

icals, socialists, anarchists, mages and *zutistes*. It is a wonder that some of the soirées of *La Plume* did not end like the fight of the Kilkenny cats, which, according to the Irish legend, devoured one another so thoroughly that next day neither a cat nor a hair was to be found on the field of battle.

With Canqueteau, Bailliot, Lemercier and Ferny, that gamin Cazals was the joy, the burst of laughter, the thumb to the nose of those soirées. Respecting nothing and nobody, he made faces, like a true Paris street-arab, at those he loved best: at Verlaine, whose rum-and-water he celebrated; at Moréas, whose last cigar he sang. This urchin, by a piquant contrast, was strangely like the young Delacroix. And so, in his absent moments, he would take himself very seriously, and forget himself so far as to sing, in verses of real feeling, the loves, the sorrows and the sad fate of poor F. A. C. But laughter, that courage of bohemians, would soon break out over the regrets, and poor F. A. C. became merry Cazals once more. What rollicking choruses he struck up, castanets in hand, in the smoky cellar of the Soleil d'Or, where the most infirm piano in Paris gave up trying to accompany

him! Verlaine's inseparable companion (he even brought him to the Soleil d'Or one Carnival night, crowned with an enormous turban), he shared the master's easy, good-natured philosophy, and took the chances of life cheerfully. He answered ill fortune with songs. A whole period lives again in his collection *Le Jardin des ronces*, whose only fault is that it does not make us young again. Where are the songs of yesteryear, and Verlaine's rum-and-water, and Moréas's last cigar?

"Having come, as Dante says, to the middle of the road of life, I feel a somewhat melancholy joy in telling over the memories that remain to me of those days of struggle for sovereign art and of ardent convictions." So writes M. Adolphe Retté at the beginning of the book he has just devoted to Symbolism.

That melancholy which smiles, and sometimes even bursts out laughing, I felt as I read him. What! all this was happening barely fifteen years ago, and already it is ancient chronicle and matter for reminiscence? Are we entering literary history already? Be that as it may, the bibliography of Symbolism grows from day to day. M. Gustave Kahn in *Symbolistes et Décadents*, M. Jean Car-

rère in articles which I hope he will collect in a volume, and M. Adolphe Retté in his present book have gathered the materials that will serve for the definitive writing of the *Légende du Symbolisme* which M. Henri Degron is diligently preparing, and which will be the awaited sequel to M. Catulle Mendès's *Légende du Parnasse contemporain*.

While I blame M. Adolphe Retté for having committed some indiscretions that may harm one of the noblest poets of our generation, I praise him for having told frankly and ingenuously the somewhat turbulent episodes of our youth. Austere people who might be scandalised by our innocent escapades may reassure themselves with the thought that Symbolism as a whole cannot have been compromised by the thoughtless high jinks of a few of its adepts. Symbolism had its great and its little cénacle, just as Romanticism had. After their first youth one hardly ever saw MM. de Régnier, Vielé-Griffin or Albert Samain in the Latin Quarter, the usual theatre of our exploits. In the same way the habitués of Victor Hugo's salon were seldom to be met in the tumbledown house in the impasse du Doyenné, where Théo, Gérard, Arsène

Houssaye and Camille Rogier amused themselves on Sundays, while the lady on the floor below was out at Mass, by fishing out of the window for her goldfish left on the balcony.

Make no mistake, however: if we knew how to be merry, our one concern was literature. We went in solid bands from the “Voltaire” to the “François Ier”, from the “d’Harcourt” to the “Grand Comptoir”, declaiming verses, and far more drunk with lyricism than with alcohol. There were fine nights when we could not manage to finish the discussion we had begun. Dawn would then surprise us at the Halles, where Moréas never failed to buy a raw artichoke, which he held while he peeled it like a sceptre, like Agamemnon. He usually had a fine train behind him: Charles Morice, prophesying with a fatal air about *La Littérature de tout à l’heure*; Adolphe Retté, whom we had to restrain from cutting the throats of passers-by afflicted with blue eyes and fair hair, for he took them all for his intimate enemy Rodenbach; Jean Carrère, striking up the *Coupo Santo* in a ringing voice; Paul Gauguin, in ecstasies before the heaps of carrots and curly cabbages; Albert Aurier, squinting with an evil eye

at the policemen who dared to admonish us; Frédéric Corbier, preoccupied with a problem in algebra, or dreaming (who knows?) of his future suicide; Gaston Dubreuilh, who amused himself by exasperating Henri Quittard with praise of *La Dame blanche*; Édouard Dubus, proclaiming, so melancholy beneath his mocking Pierrot's mask: "I am a hair in the hand of Providence!"; Henri Degron, chilly, wan and unkempt, dreaming in the fetid morning mist of the cherry trees in flower in his native Japan; Julien Leclercq and Dauphin Meunier, passing carefully under the trees of the Square des Innocents for fear of catching their Absalom locks in them; the Chevalier Maurice du Plessis de Lyman, more familiarly M. Flandre, who was insinuating the Romanist heresy into his master, the imperturbable eater of artichokes; Louis Le Cardonnel, slyly recruiting knights of goodwill for the Order of the Lamb, which he had founded to restore the States of the Church to the Pope; and lastly Yvanhoé Rambosson, who little suspected that he would one day receive the most illustrious painters of Paris in his office at the Petit Palais.

Sometimes we were fewer, and the talk grew more intimate. I shall never forget a night spent at Baratte's with Vielé-Griffin and Adolphe Retté. In the hubbub of tipsy voices, amid the tunes of a deplorable band, to which my two friends gave silver coins to play, to my great scandal, Boulangist airs, we had spent hours of emotion talking of poets and poetry. Little by little the dawn turned the windows green. Through the half-open door the acrid smell of the vegetables came to us in gusts from the Halles. The café was emptying. It was then that Vielé-Griffin drew a manuscript from his pocket and recited to us, in that setting of commonplace debauch, like a purifying prayer, one of his masterpieces, *La Ronde de la Marguerite*:

> *Où est la Marguerite?*
> *Ô gué, ô gué, ô gué,*
> *Où est la Marguerite?*
> *Elle est dans son château de fleurs et de charmilles.*
>
> [Where is the Marguerite?
> O gué, o gué, o gué,
> Where is the Marguerite?
> She is in her castle of flowers and of arbours.]

I should like, apropos of M. Retté's book, to call up some other memories which will complete his and those of M. Gustave Kahn. I shall try to put them in as much order as I can.

Would anyone suspect that the first grouping of the poets who were later to make Symbolism illustrious took place as early as 1882, at the Lycée Fontanes (now Condorcet)? I then had for my fellow pupils in the rhetoric class Éphraïm Mikhaël, René Ghil, Pierre Quillard, André Fontainas, Rodolphe Darzens and Georges Vanor. I must not forget Gabriel Lefeuve, who has stayed faithful to the Parnassian traditions; nor Édouard Guillaumet, son of the Orientalist painter and author of several volumes of verse; nor Charles-Eugène Bonin, who initiated me into Baudelaire, and who would have become a great poet had not mysterious Asia drawn his restless traveller's curiosity. Lastly Tristan Bernard, a good deal younger, followed from a lower form what we wrote in the *Fou*.

The *Fou*! Does a single file of it survive today? It was a tiny lithographed paper of four pages, edited first by Édouard Guillaumet, then by Georges Vanor, who was then called Van Ormelingen. What finished giving a little

Dutch air to this memorable gazette was the formidable name of our lithographer: Schouster-Van Hommeslager. I believe we still owe him money.

I remember very well that the *Fou* was adorned with songs by Darzens, sonnets by Quillard, prose poems by Bonin, and barcarolles by your humble servant. René Ghil put in burning verses addressed to Mlle Marguerite Ugalde, whom he had seen at the Nouveautés and adored from afar: oh! from very far! Éphraïm Mikhaël distinguished himself with a *Ballade à la concierge de mon cousin*, a lady who had offended his youthful dignity as a poet. As for Guillaumet, he wrote half the paper by himself, for he was inexhaustibly fertile. When he came down from class he would ask me with a proud air: “Guess how many sonnets I’ve done in two hours?” I, who in that space of time had painfully given birth to one quatrain, would venture: “A sonnet and a half?” “No, old fellow: seventeen!”

Things very nearly went badly for us. A paper of the day, *Le Petit Moniteur universel*, took notice of the *Fou* in an article entitled “Schoolboy Literature”. It reproduced a naturalist sonnet of mine, “Le Gourmand”, and,

if I remember rightly, a sonnet by Quillard which began with this impeccable alexandrine:

> *Un lendemain de fête on a mal aux cheveux.*
> [The morning after a party, one's hair aches.]

They very nearly called us the Petroniuses of the Lycée Fontanes. The headmaster took alarm and forbade the sale of the *Fou* at our only agent, a bookseller in the Passage du Havre. He made no inquiry, knowing very well that we would all stand together, and that, if he came down too hard, he ran the risk of losing his best pupils and a few prizes and honourable mentions at the Concours Général. The storm passed, and the *Fou* came out again.

This illustrious paper was not enough for our energies. We founded a literary club, the Moineaux Francs, which held its sittings every Thursday in the parlour of a shady hotel in the rue de la Victoire. There we read verses, talked of the book of the day, and venerated our friend Fontainas, who had just published his first poem in the *Jeune Belgique*. The monthly subscription was fixed at one franc. But we did not always possess those twenty sous, and we had to clear out of the rue de la Victoire,

leaving a little debt to the landlord of the hotel, just as to poor M. Schouster-Van Hommeslager. The last meeting of the club was held in the open air, in the Parc Monceau. Unluckily, a provoking nursemaid there entirely demoralised our treasurer, who vanished with the forty-five sous in the cash-box. He has since become a distinguished anarchist.

The moment has come to tell a little anecdote that I might entitle: How I Did Not See Victor Hugo.

Édouard Guillaumet, who was then the intimate friend of young Georges Hugo, proposed that we should offer the honorary presidency of the Moineaux Francs to Victor Hugo. His motion was carried by acclamation, and a committee, made up of Quillard, Guillaumet and myself, was appointed to beg the master to accept the honour we were doing him.

So one Thursday we took the Passy–Bourse omnibus, not without the solemn thought that the august hindquarters of the poet of poets had perhaps rested on the very seat on the top where we were sitting. When we reached the little house in the avenue d'Eylau, we had to implore Guillaumet to pull the bell, for emotion had

taken the strength out of our arms, and to open the negotiations, for it was strangling our voices. A maidservant answered that she did not know whether Monsieur Victor Hugo was at home (that "Monsieur" rang strangely in our ears), and asked us to wait in the drawing-room on the mezzanine. Guillaumet left us to go and see his friend Georges on the floor above.

Was that drawing-room hung in red, blue, pink or green? Had it two windows or three, one door or two? Was its furniture Henri IV, Louis XVI or Empire? I do not know, for I could not take my eyes off a round table on which lay the *Tombeau de Théophile Gautier*. Neither the table nor the book interested me particularly. But my capsized mind needed some precise detail to cling to. It was thanks to that helpful table that I did not faint. Little by little, however, I recovered myself, and my attention was drawn to a magnificent cat which was prowling round us. I pointed it out to Quillard, who looked as pale and undone as I did. Yet he had the unheard-of audacity to seize the cat, and in a hoarse voice he asked me: "Stuart, have you any scissors on you?" Not supposing that he wished to emasculate the noble animal, I whispered: "No,

but what do you want scissors for?" "To cut a tuft of hair off Victor Hugo's cat and keep it as a souvenir!"

I assure you I did not dream of laughing, the less so as panic was seizing me again. I could hear heavy footsteps coming down the stairs. It was Victor Hugo, beyond all doubt. The steps came nearer. Quillard was sweating with emotion; my heart was beating the charge. The mysterious feet reached the door; a hand was turning the knob. We felt upon our temples the breath of a swoon. The door opened slowly, very slowly... It was the maidservant, come to tell us that Monsieur Victor Hugo was not at home. O blessed lie! We tumbled down the stairs four at a time, without waiting for Guillaumet, and ran to take a restorative at the wine-shop on the corner.

That same year, that is to say in 1882, Pierre Quillard, at the head of a delegation from the Lycée Fontanes, took his place in the interminable procession that carried the good wishes of Paris, of France and of the world to Victor Hugo on his eightieth birthday. He had the courage to read him, without fainting, a sonnet full of military metaphors (yes, Quillard!). As for me, being far more timid, I had broken away from the delegation and found myself

caught, unable to go forward or back, in the crowd that was crushing itself in front of Victor Hugo's house. I remember that a good fellow, ground by the multitude, turned a woeful face towards me and cried, with tears in his voice: "To think I can't even lift my arms to take my hat off to the good God!" I forgot to say that Victor Hugo, flanked by Georges and Jeanne, was at his window, saluting his people.

I saw Hugo a second time, one morning as I was passing along the avenue d'Eylau. I raised my eyes to the famous window: the god was putting on his braces and sniffing the spring air.

Meanwhile we had all written verses, and we were dreaming of publishing a book together. We were then writing for a little paper published by one Henri Jouve, who, I believe, is still in the book trade. He used to organise literary evenings, attended by verse-mad bourgeois and, among other men of letters, Léo Trézenik and Georges d'Esparbès. He also organised competitions, and published the prize-winning pieces, for a consideration. I have before me a little volume dated 1883, *Poésies et*

Nouvelles, which contains, among other pieces, Rodolphe Darzens's *L'Étoile des âmes*:

> *J'aime à voir, appuyé le soir sur ma fenêtre,*
> *L'obscurité descendre et les étoiles naître*
> *Au loin lumières d'or;*
> *J'aime à sentir passer le vent des nuits d'automne*
> *Modulant dans les airs sa chanson monotone*
> *Qui me berce et m'endort!*
>
> [I love to watch, leaning on my window-sill at evening,
> The darkness come down and the stars be born,
> Far-off lights of gold;
> I love to feel the wind of autumn nights go by,
> Modulating through the air its monotonous song,
> Which rocks me and lulls me to sleep!]

La Terre nue, by René Ghilbert (today René Ghil):

> *Ce soir, sur les champs veufs des grands épis moulus,*
> *La pluie ample poudroie, et la terre au corps veule,*
> *Comme une mère énorme et qui soupire seule,*
> *Tend sa mamelle ronde aux mamelons velus.*

[This evening, on the fields widowed of the great ground
ears,
The ample rain rises like dust, and the earth with flaccid
body,
Like an enormous mother sighing alone,
Holds out her round breast with its hairy nipples.]

Le Lunatique, by Stuart Merrill:

Ô reine au sein de marbre, ô splendide Astarté,
Qui vas versant ton or dans les nuits inconnues,
Un voile au dur éclat de ta virginité!
Une ombre à tes blancheurs implacablement nues!

[O queen of the marble breast, O splendid Astarte,
Who go pouring your gold into unknown nights,
A veil for the hard brilliance of your virginity!
A shadow for your implacably naked whiteness!]

Le Sillon, by Georges Michel (later Éphraïm Mikhaël):

Lentement, sous un ciel implacable et torride,
Traînant d'un pied lassé sa charrue au soc lourd
Et, comme un moribond, tendant sa gorge aride,
Le taureau fait sonner son pas lugubre et sourd.

[Slowly, beneath an implacable and torrid sky,
Dragging with weary foot his heavy-shared plough,
And, like a dying man, stretching out his parched throat,
The bull makes his dull and doleful tread resound.]

So far I have quoted only the first stanza of each piece. Here, in full, is a trifle signed Samain, whom we did not yet know:

Gabrielle, ô ma brunette,
Aimons-nous, le temps est court,
Baisons nos lèvres, minette…
Rien ne vaut encore l'amour.
Il me faut ton frais sourire
Et tes grands yeux plein d'émoi…
Le flot roule où Dieu t'attire,
La chanson va vers la lyre
Et mon cœur s'en va vers toi.

[Gabrielle, O my little brunette,
Let us love, the time is short;
Let us kiss our lips, my pet…
Nothing yet is worth love.
I must have your fresh smile
And your great eyes full of feeling…
The wave rolls where God draws you,
The song goes towards the lyre,
And my heart goes out to you.]

If I have quoted these verses and the ones before, it is not to make fun of poets of whom two have already entered into immortality. I should, besides, be my own victim. No, it is to give a little courage to poets of eighteen, and even of twenty, who despair of attaining perfection of form. Poetry demands a hard apprenticeship which, to tell the truth, ends only with death. Beware of masters of twenty, and be sure that it is not they who will lead their generation later on.

To give some idea of the rather bemused mentality of the contributors to the volume, I quote this opening of a short story: “Everybody knows Yvetot. That Norman watering-place…”

Lastly, from an abbé, Louis Vigué, here are some verses of a strange topicality which he dedicated to the swallows of those days:

Votre tort, ô mes hirondelles,
— Et je ne puis vous disculper —
Votre tort, c'est d'avoir des ailes;
Dans notre siècle il faut ramper.

La force, hélas! prime et domine
Dans nos pays civilisés;
Pauvres oiseaux, allez en Chine,
Vous n'êtes pas autorisés.

[Your fault, O my swallows
(And I cannot excuse you),
Your fault is to have wings;
In our century one must crawl.

Force, alas! comes first and rules
In our civilised lands;
Poor birds, go off to China:
You are not authorised.]

Our keenest wish was to part company with these clerical swallows and these Yvetot bathers, and to publish a new collective book of our own. That book never appeared, for peremptory reasons which I find in a letter

from Éphraïm Mikhaël of 18 October 1883: “We have spoken to Jouve about the famous idea of our collective book. He approves, and offers us, for a hundred and thirty francs, a volume in the format of the Bibliothèque Nationale series (at 25 centimes), sixty-four pages, three hundred copies. Darzens is wildly enthusiastic about the idea. So am I! Behold us great and illustrious. We have a publisher, we come out, we stagger the Press, our three hundred copies multiply with a macabre and Rollinat-esque rapidity (*Les Névroses* had just appeared) and sell by the thousand. Sarcey invites us to dinner and does not give us roast goose and French beans (our usual menu in the Quarter); we are girt with a halo of glory. Darzens is lord and master of all the girls in the Quarter, and we of the others, those of all the theatres, leaving the Odéon to Lefeuve and the Nouveautés to Ghilbert. Only, I have fifty centimes in my pocket, and we need a hundred and thirty francs.”

Is that not young and charming?

Apropos of Éphraïm Mikhaël, I think it interesting to recall that as early as 1884, in the course of a walk in the Luxembourg Gardens, he expounded to me the theory of

free verse, and read me some free verses, which, by the way, he never published. This takes nothing from the glory of M. Gustave Kahn and of Mme Marie Krysinska, who dispute the priority of inventing this form. But it proves at least that at that time people everywhere, without any concert among them, were seeking to free themselves from the over-narrow rules of classical prosody. The idea of free verse was, as they say, in the air.

Dear days of *Sturm und Drang*! I am not one of those who place happiness in the past, and who maintain that youth alone is happy. I think, on the contrary, that the sense of harmony grows finer with age in those who are well born; and I gladly subscribe to this noble thought of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's: "A law of the gods has willed that the intensity of a joy be measured by the greatness of the despair endured for it." Nevertheless I think with a kind of ironical tenderness of the naive enthusiasm of our eighteenth year. Ah! how sincerely we hated the bourgeois! I remember that Quillard, when we came out of class, was in the habit of stopping before a grocer's shop in the rue Caumartin, fixing the proprietor with his calm and honest eyes, and abusing him in decidedly violent

terms, in which there came back, like a refrain, the formula of execration: “You dirty grocer, you!” The worthy tradesman, who was peaceable and without gall, never understood anything of the gratuitous animosity of this young schoolboy, who was later to take Sultan Abdul-Hamid for his Aunt Sally.

I confess, for my part, that I have kept this hatred of the bourgeois intact, as have many of my comrades. This salutary hatred has preserved us from the promiscuity of fashionable drawing-rooms, newspaper offices and the boulevard theatres. It has allowed us to keep our living strength for the worship and the defence of poetry, in an age when, if poets are many, their readers are few. Even if it should one day be proved to us that we had no talent at all, nobody will be able to deny our disinterestedness and our enthusiasm.

1904–1905.

THE END

Marko Prekić Kentera is a Belgrade-born poet and literature enthusiast dedicated to making rare and forgotten public domain works accessible through translation, with a focus on the French Symbolist movement. He uses collaborative AI-assisted methods to create these translations, which he shares freely for other readers to discover and enjoy. Other translations include works by and about Stéphane Mallarmé, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Édouard Dujardin, Charles Morice, Octave Mirbeau, Stuart Merrill, René Ghil, Émile Hennequin, Gustave Kahn, Ernest Raynaud and others. These translations are freely available at leonhenniquenovel.com, together with his original poetry and his translations of poetry into Serbian.